

Van Peebles at forefront of independent film movement

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Twenty-five years ago writer/director/actor **Melvin Van Peebles** made film history with the release of his controversial, independent feature "Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asss Song." The film was not his first, but it was the one that placed him at the forefront of the independent film movement. **Van Peebles** is credited with what later became known as the decade of Black Exploitation or blaxploitation films.

Today's Black filmmakers continue to credit **Van Peeble's** breakthroughs in cinema techniques and his brash approach to controversial subject matters, which opened up Hollywood to talented Black artists. Three of **Van Peeble's** earlier films, "Story of a Three Day Pass," "Don't Play us Cheap" and "Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asss Song," are now available in a three-pack set.

Van Peebles: In some slight ways yea and in some ways it's changed tremendously. When "Sweetback" became such a big hit, Hollywood wanted to immediately cash in on it. The movie became the largest grossing independent film during that time. So this caused them to have to use Blacks in creative positions who had the same sensitivity of the Black audiences. Even though "Sweetback" wasn't a 'blaxploitation' film, it did spawn the whole so-called blaxploitation film movement.

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Van Peebles at forefront of independent film movement

Twenty-five years ago writer/director/actor **Melvin Van Peebles** made film history with the release of his controversial, independent feature "Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asss Song." The film was not his first, but it was the one that placed him at the forefront of the independent film movement. **Van Peebles** is credited with what later became known as the decade of Black Exploitation or blaxploitation films.

Today's Black filmmakers continue to credit Van Peeble's breakthroughs in cinema techniques and his brash approach to controversial subject matters, which opened up Hollywood to talented Black artists. Three of Van Peeble's earlier films, "Story of a Three Day Pass," "Don't Play us Cheap" and "Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asss Song," are now available in a three-pack set.

"Sweet Sweetback" tells the story of a pimp on the run. The film was made for \$500,000 and grossed over \$10 million! His film "Story of a Three Day Pass," was made in France and tells the story of a Black GI stationed in Europe who decides to take his white girlfriend on a weekend holiday, despite the disapproval of his superior officer. "Don't Play Us Cheap" was originally one of Van Peeble's Broadway productions, which he later adapted to film. But the movie has never been distributed.

The Scoop recently talked with the legendary filmmaker about his varied, interesting and exciting career. Read on....

Scoop: Tell me about the special release of your three-movie pack.

Van Peebles: Each one of these films has been very special to me. "The Story of A Three Day Pass" was shot in France. I later came to the San Francisco Film Festival in 1967 with this film. I was the French delegate of the film festival. The film won the Critic's Choice Award from the festival. What this did was really embarrass Hollywood because during that time they had no minority filmmakers. So, this kind of forced Hollywood to counteract and also get a Black film director. This was the first dent made into breaking down those Hollywood barriers.

Scoop: Had you previously tried to break into hollywood as a director?

Van Peebles: Yes, 10 years earlier I tried. I had some short films which I showed them. They in turn offered me a job as an elevator operator. I wanted to get to the top in the film business, but not as an elevator operator! Anyway, I went on to do "Watermelon Man" for Columbia Studios, with a three-picture deal. But I still wasn't satisfied. I still hadn't made the kind of film that I really wanted to, until I made "Sweetback," which I had to make independently.

Scoop: How did you manage to maintain so much control of the "Sweetback" film?

Van Peebles: Many people told me that I was very astute for keeping control of that movie. But what they don't know is that I was begging people to chip in with me but nobody would do it, so that's why I owned everything. The third movie in this three-film package release is called "Don't Play Us Cheap," which I did after "Sweetback." This one was originally a Broadway play.

Scoop: The character in the "Sweetback" movie has a very strong Black male image. What do you think about the "Black man" image in today's movies?

Van Peebles: That's something that I never discuss. I prefer to express my opinions through my work -- such as the films I've worked on like "Panther" or "Gang In Blue."

Scoop: Has a lot really changed for Black filmmakers since you began doing independent films?

Van Peebles: In some slight ways yea and in some ways it's changed tremendously. When "Sweetback" became such a big hit, Hollywood wanted to immediately cash in on it. The movie became the largest grossing independent film during that time. So this caused them to have to use Blacks in creative positions who had the same sensitivity of the Black audiences. Even though "Sweetback" wasn't a 'blaxploitation' film, it did spawn the whole so-called blaxploitation film movement.

Scoop: How did you feel about that term "blaxploitation?" I've talked with some actors who've said they didn't like it.

Van Peebles: It didn't really apply to me. But the term has a derogatory sense about it, which doesn't surprise me. As you know, everybody tries to keep us in our place with these various labels. The good news is that the blaxploitation years also spawned a huge infrastructure of Black writers, designers, producers, lighting people etc. to get jobs and the experience of working on films from which they had previously been barred.

Scoop: As we all know, Hollywood politics can be as bad as Washington politics. Is there any way an independent filmmaker can get around it?

Van Peebles: From time to time some get around it. For example, my movie "Don't Play Us Cheap" has never been released because they banned together and wouldn't give me a distribution deal. This was done in attempt to 'kill me off' so to speak, financially.

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